

IOWA OUTDOORS

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

www.iowadnr.gov

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SCIENCE KEY IN DECATUR COUNTY TURKEY POACHING CASE

Poachers beware; the same technology used to prove the guilt or innocence of a person based on DNA evidence has now been used to convict a poacher in an Iowa court of law.

The case began on March 26, 2007, with an anonymous tip that led conservation officer Craig Roberg to a Decatur County home on April 4. Roberg seized five packages of what appeared to be wild turkey breast meat from a freezer while executing a search warrant. The owner of the meat, Mike Jones, claimed it was domestic turkey meat in his freezer. Officer Roberg believed otherwise.

This is not the first time Jones has been in court facing turkey poaching charges. In 1993, and along with his brother, Jerry, he was acquitted on reasonable doubt in a similar case involving the origin of turkey meat in their possession. The science just was not yet there to prove the case.

While working the present case, Roberg contacted Dr. Karen Mock, a conservation geneticist with the Department of Wildland Resources at Utah State University in Logan, Utah, who had been working with the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf) to build a national database of wild turkey DNA. The database

consists of nearly 2,000 samples contributed by hunters and game managers, primarily from eastern states – Florida, West Virginia, North Carolina, Mississippi and, to a lesser extent, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona.

This sample collection originally developed to identify subspecies boundaries and to aid in translocation planning and management, is also useful for identifying the source of suspected poaching samples, such as those in the Jones case. Unfortunately, Iowa was not well represented in this database. Roberg, however, enlisted his coworkers in collecting nearly 80 reference samples from locations near the suspected poaching site in Iowa. These samples were critical in identifying the source of the samples in Jones' freezer.

Decatur County Attorney Lisa Jeanes told the defense attorney the county was planning to test turkey DNA to determine if it was a wild bird or a domestic and asked the defense if they were willing to discuss a plea. The defendant, recalling the 1993 case, declined.

The Utah State University lab is primarily a research lab, so work on the case had to be fit in among other projects, but officer Roberg accepted the time constraints. His patience paid off. Testing took months. Once the tissue samples arrived in Utah, Dr. Mock took extra care to track samples through a chain of custody form. To extract the DNA, she set up a double blind system so the lab technician would not know which sample is which. They compare the test results to the reference samples from Iowa and other places in the eastern US.

"You go a long way in the lab, not knowing how the work is progressing, and then at the end you get the results in five minutes," Mock said. In this case, the samples taken from Jones' freezer showed a strong association with wild turkeys, and specifically wild turkeys from southern Iowa.

Once the results were in and presented to the defendant, Jones was more than willing to accept a plea agreement and avoid going to trial. Part of the plea required the defendant to pay \$1,000 in restitution that would go toward the cost of conducting the DNA analysis. If left to a judge to decide, goes the reasoning, the restitution amount could have gone much higher.

Most of the fish and wildlife violations in Decatur County never reach the courtroom, Jeanes said. Defendants usually plead guilty, so the cases do not reach her desk. "This certainly was an unusual case," Jeanes said. "Had it not been for Craig, I would not have known this technology was available for use."

"I think it's an important precedent. Wildlife markers have been used in other species, but not in wild turkeys. I think it is an important first step," Mock said. Meanwhile, the reference samples from Iowa have been added to the national wild turkey DNA database, significantly lowering the cost of analysis in any future poaching cases from this area.

“It’s a database that’s growing all the time and that’s the kind of database it is going to take to nail these cases,” Mock said.

For more information, contact Dale Garner, chief of the DNR’s wildlife bureau, at 515-281-6156.

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SAYLORVILLE LAKE ON THE ‘A’ LIST IN BIRDING COMMUNITY

DES MOINES – Saylorville Lake is becoming famous as a premier birding area drawing visitors from around the Midwest and beyond, and for good reason. The number of rare and unique birds visiting the central Iowa reservoir has been on the rise.

But what is it about Saylorville that is attracting these birds? Doug Harr, with the DNR’s wildlife diversity program, said the lake is a fairly large body of water with a lot of food to offer, and it sits conveniently along a migratory flight path. But that does not explain why a few weeks ago a black-tailed gull, found in China, Korea and Japan, was recorded for the first time ever in Iowa at the lake.

Harr said black-tailed gulls occasionally get to the Alaskan coast or to the New England coast, but not to the middle of North America.

“How did it get to Iowa? We just don’t know,” Harr said. He speculated that the gull possibly was a vagrant and may have joined other migrants down, or it could have possibly been blown off course by a storm. However it got here, it’s not alone.

Saylorville has often been a gathering place for the large number of really good birders from central Iowa who spend hours searching the sky and water for unique birds.

Other rare gulls and oceanic species spotted at Saylorville include the lesser black backed gull, the little gull and the black legged kittiwake. On Lake Red Rock, a mew gull, a visitor from Alaska, was recently recorded.

Typically, Iowa hosts ring-billed gulls and Franklin gulls, and during the winter, herring gulls from the Great Lakes. Gulls can be difficult to distinguish from one another because they change plumage annually during the first four years of life.

Other unique species using the reservoirs include the Pacific loon and, on Nov. 28, a yellow-billed loon was spotted. The yellow-billed loon is native to arctic Canada and has only been to Iowa a handful of times. It was seen swimming alongside a common loon.

“We have had every loon in North America on Saylorville Lake at one time or another,” Harr said.

The birds are using these large reservoirs, feeding on the plentiful gizzard shad, just like the visiting bald eagles.

Another unique bird was discovered in east Tama County, north of Clutier. A fork-tailed flycatcher, native to Panama, in Central America, was recorded for the first time ever in Iowa. It is similar to the scissor-tailed flycatcher but only darker in color. The scissor-tailed flycatcher is common in the south central U.S. and occasionally has been found in southern Iowa. The fork-tailed flycatcher can be up to 16 inches long, with 10 of those inches consisting of its tail.

This is not just a recent phenomenon. In September, a wood stork and a black vulture were recorded at Saylorville. Both species are common to the southeast U.S. It was only the sixth time a black vulture has been recorded in Iowa.

People are traveling from all over the Midwest to Saylorville to view these rare birds. Iowa is becoming a birding destination and that means economic benefits to central Iowa.

Birding 101

For someone interested in looking for these rare visitors and who is not an avid birder, here are a few tips.

- At the very least, get a good pair of binoculars 8 to 10 power minimum.
- The black-tailed gull is most often spotted right after dawn and just before sunset in the area between Cherry Glen and Sandpiper Cove on the east side of the lake.
- Bring along a copy of The Sibley Guide to Birds, a common reference book

For more information, contact Doug Harr at 515-281-4815.

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WEATHER DAMPENS DEER OPENER

Iowa's shotgun deer season got off to a rain-sleet-ice soaked start over the weekend. Hunters throughout the state were pelted by some combination of the stuff throughout the day Saturday. “I have never seen a day like that,” admitted DNR recreational safety officer Pat Jorgensen. “I have seen weekends with a lot of snow, but that rain was miserable.”

The miserable weather brought many hunters in early, and forced those who did face the elements to change their approach. “Deer like running into the wind, so we’d try turning around runs around,” explained Mike Liercke, of Center Point. “We had a southeast wind, so we’d try pushing them to the south. Usually we run north. It changed the way we ‘game planned.’”

Sunday’s weather was much better, but a sheet of ice caused loud and treacherous walking across much of the state. Many officers expected hunters who might normally just hunt the weekend to take a day or two during the week to try to fill more tags. The first shotgun season ends Wednesday, December 5.

The foul weather might provide an incentive for hunters to take advantage of late season dates. “Many counties in southern Iowa go undersold because they are a long drive from major population centers. There aren’t a lot of people living in those counties,” said Tom Litchfield, DNR deer biologist. “If you are willing to make the trip, though, it can offer some good hunting.”

Most of the southern two tiers of counties in Iowa still have hundreds of antlerless tags available, which can be used for the late muzzleloader, bow or the special late January season. Several east and northeast counties have large quotas remaining, too. Hunters can check the county by county allotment by going online at www.iowadnr.gov and clicking on ‘Hunting & Wildlife’ on the left, and then scrolling down the left side to ‘Availability of Limited Quota Licenses.’

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[Electronic photos available]

WINTER STORM BRINGS SPECTACULAR BIRD MIGRATION TO IOWA

By Lowell Washburn

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

It may not have been the storm of the century, but for many Iowans last weekend’s winter blast sure felt like it.

Nothing was left unscathed. Across the southern half of the state, the season’s first major storm system will mostly be remembered for its unwelcome delivery of ice that left pedestrians and motorists on less than secure footing. In Iowa’s northern counties, the scenario was somewhat different. The weather event began with a picture perfect, day-long snowfall. Unfortunately, the snow turned to afternoon sleet and the sleet eventually became rain. By Sunday morning, the landscape was encased in a thick and paralyzing coat of ice.

But there was another aspect to this powerful storm system that, at least among wildlife watchers, will be remembered and retold for months to come. Regardless of region, Iowa bird enthusiasts will long remember the weekend of December 1 as being the stage for one of the most incredible late season bird migrations observed during this decade and perhaps longer.

Most spectacular was the mass exodus of Canada geese. During the past several weeks, tens of thousands of these weather hardy birds have been huddled around the last remaining, North Country air holes. But even a Canada goose has its limits. When last week's sledge hammer weather system began sealing off food supplies the huge flocks decided to call it quits.

Although some goose flocks had begun trickling into the state by late Saturday, most stayed put until the snow and sleet had ended. Then, as winds shifted to the northwest, honker hordes lost no time in departing for the wintering grounds.

By Sunday morning, the migration had gathered a full head of steam as countless flocks of southbound Canadas filled the Iowa skies. By mid-day, the migration seemed without end. Scanning the horizon, a half dozen or more large flocks could often be viewed simultaneously. The sound was incredible. Coupled with the roar of a razor-sharp wind, the chorus belied a dramatic sense of urgency that only storm tossed Canada geese can convey.

Along with the incredible goose numbers came other birds from the North ---- the last ragged Vee's of mallard ducks, low flying squadrons of goldeneyes, majestic bald eagles, a handful of northern harriers, and noisy echelons of wild swans.

It would have been nice if a significant number of those northern migrants would have chosen to remain in Iowa --- at least for awhile. Unfortunately, the current weather conditions were equally miserable to what had forced the birds from the Northland in the first place. Almost without exception, the endless flocks of weekend travelers appeared "due north" and quickly disappeared straight to the south. With several hundred feet of altitude already beneath their wings and a howling northwest wind providing a free ride, there was little reason to tarry.

The storm moved quickly. By Monday morning the Iowa skies were free of clouds. Free of wind. And, regrettably, were also free of birds.

This year's December Bird Fest can be summed up with two words ---- Brief and Spectacular. For those who braved the elements to celebrate the passage, it was a winter migration that will be long remembered.

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EAGLE LAKE WETLANDS BIRD CONSERVATION AREA DEDICATION

FOREST CITY - A ceremony to dedicate the Eagle Lake Wetland Complex as Iowa's newest Bird Conservation Area (BCA) will take place Wednesday, December 19, at 1:30 p.m., at the Faculty Lounge in the Waldorf College Student Center, at the intersection of S. 8th St. & W. I St.

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is hosting the dedication that will include brief presentations and the unveiling of a special Bird Conservation Area sign. Following the ceremony, there will be a short driving tour of the area.

The Eagle Lake Wetlands area is one of Iowa's largest and most important remaining wetland complexes. "Designating the Eagle Lake Wetland Complex as a Bird Conservation Area will add to its recognition by indicating its importance for nesting and migratory grassland and wetland birds," said Bruce Ehresman, DNR wildlife diversity program biologist. "This area provides important nesting habitat for declining grassland birds, such as Northern Harrier, Bobolink, Sedge Wren, and meadowlarks; for declining wetland species like Black and Forster's terns, American Bittern, and Redhead ducks; plus the area provides nesting and migration stopover habitat for many other bird species suffering nationwide declines."

"Creating Bird Conservation Areas in Iowa is a priority for DNR's wildlife diversity program and is part of a larger international effort promoting assistance for all birds with the greatest conservation need," said Doug Harr, DNR's state program coordinator for wildlife diversity. Harr emphasizes that, "the BCA program encourages habitat conservation at a large landscape level in order to re-establish stable or growing bird populations. Each BCA includes a combination of well-managed public and private lands, and since the program is non-regulatory, private landowners participate only if they wish."

"The designation of the Eagle Lake Wetlands Bird Conservation Area serves as recognition of the excellent teamwork of many partners, cooperating to emphasize the importance of habitat for all birds. State, federal, and county conservation agencies, working together with private conservation organizations and citizens have made this possible," said Greg Hanson, DNR wildlife biologist and Rice Lake Wildlife Unit manager.

"Bird watching is now among the nation's fastest-growing outdoor activities, and bird watching along with general wildlife watching is a \$304 million industry in Iowa. It is anticipated that this new BCA will attract bird enthusiasts from throughout the region," Harr said. "This increased activity by birders should promote growth of the local tourism economy and encourage investment in local bird conservation."

The public is welcome to attend this event. Bird conservationists and wetland appreciators alike are asked to help celebrate the dedication of this very important Bird Conservation Area.

For more information, contact Ehresman at (515) 432-2823, Harr at (515) 281-4815, or Hanson at (641) 324-2431.

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2008 HUNTING, FISHING LICENSES ON SALE DEC. 15

DES MOINES - Hunters and anglers may purchase their 2008 licenses beginning Dec. 15. Deer hunters with tags for the January antlerless-only season are required to purchase a new hunting license if they hunt after Jan. 10. The 2007 licenses are good through Jan. 10, 2008. Annual resident hunting and fishing license for 2008 cost \$17.50 each, the same as in 2007.

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IOWA LAKES ARE BEGINNING TO FREEZE

CLEAR LAKE - Winter has arrived over much of Iowa, and cold night time temperatures has produced a layer of ice over many lakes. Ice conditions will need to increase in thickness to support fishing or other uses. Ice thickness is not uniform on any body of water and there is a certain level of risk associated with any activity on ice.

Jim Wahl, fisheries biologist at Clear Lake, said there are lakes in his region that have open water, including Clear Lake and Rice Lake. "Our lakes are by no means ready for ice fishing right now, but with another week of below freezing temperatures, we will probably see some fishing in the this part of the state," Wahl said.

The DNR recommends a minimum of four inches of new, clear ice for general activity, including fishing, and at least five inches for snowmobile or ATV activity. The DNR does not recommend anyone operate a car or truck on ice.

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NATURAL RESOURCE COMMISSION TO MEET DEC. 13 IN DES MOINES

DES MOINES – The Natural Resource Commission of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) will meet at 8:30 a.m., Dec. 13, in the fourth floor conference room, Wallace State Office Bldg., in Des Moines.

Members of the commission are Kim Francisco, Elizabeth Garst, Carol Kramer, Lennis Moore, Gregory Drees, Janelle Rettig and William Bird. The Director of the DNR is Richard Leopold.

The following is the agenda for the December meeting.

- Approve Agenda
- Approve Minutes of November 8 Meeting
- Director's Remarks
- Construction Projects
 - Honey Creek Destination Park, Appanoose County – Boat Docks and Slips
 - Storm Lake Marina, Buena Vista County – Concession Building
 - Walnut Woods State Park, Polk County – Grading, Wastewater, Sewer, Water and Electrical Construction
- Land Acquisition
 - Jemmerson Slough Wildlife Management Area (WMA), Dickinson County Easement Donation – General Railway Corp.
 - Palisades Kepler State Park, Harrison County - Troy
- Management Agreements
 - Jackson Station Area, Jackson County
 - Mississippi River Guttenberg Marina, Clayton County
- Chapter 18 Leases
 - Mississippi River, Clayton County – Country Properties, LC
 - Mississippi River, Clayton County – AGRI McGregor Terminal, LLC
 - Mississippi River, Muscatine County – Fairport Landing Marina, Inc.
 - Mississippi River, Muscatine County – Agriliance, LLC
- Department of the Army Lease – Mississippi River Pool 13, South Sabula Lake Access, Jackson County
- Notice of Intended Action – Chapter 31, Publicly Owned Lakes Program
- Notice of Intended Action – Chapter 33, REAP Open Spaces Scoring Criteria
- Notice of Intended Action – Chapter 37, Boating Safety Equipment
- Mike Smith Recognition
- Chapter 13 Permit Denial Appeal
- Conservation and Recreation Donations
- Contract with Central Trust Bank – Electronic Licensing System for Iowa (ELSI)
- Timber Sales
 - Lansing Wildlife Area, Allamakee County
 - Coon Creek Wildlife Area, Winneshiek County
- NRC Meeting Dates and Locations
- Honey Creek Resort State Park

- Open Records Law Training
- Legislation
- General Discussion.
- Items for Next Meeting, Jan. 15-16, in Des Moines

For more information, contact Karyn Stone at 515-281-8650

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